

Rural Roots, Patriotic Pride

A rural Iowa mural painting known as The Freedom Rock pays tribute each Memorial Day and beyond to our nation's veterans.

by **Kim Holt**

In rural Iowa, just off Hwy. 25, an hour southwest of Des Moines, is a large granite boulder some 60-90 tons in size. In years past, it was known as the town of Greenfield's "graffiti" rock. However, each of the past 13 years the giant rock has been transformed by one of agriculture's own into a symbol of freedom and a permanent marker of appreciation for our nation's veterans.

The artist is Adair County, Iowa, native Ray "Bubba" Sorensen II. He combines his lifelong passion for art and painting with that of military history to transform this used-to-be eyesore into what has become known across America — and the globe for that matter — as The Freedom Rock®.

Ray's roots are rural, tracing back to 4-H, cattle and junior livestock shows. He assures, "I've been involved in agriculture all my life." Over the years, he says his family tried other breeds, but today all have made it back to the whitefaced breed his grandfather, Ray Sorensen I, started with and still has. His parents, Mike and Dixie Sorensen, also own and publish the *Livestock Plus*, a publication they started when Ray was in high school.

Moved to paint

Having been raised in rural America, Ray enjoyed an upbringing that included a great respect for our nation's military. At the age of 19, he was especially



One of agriculture's own, The Freedom Rock Painter, Ray "Bubba" Sorensen II, with his wife, Maria, and daughter, Independence, affectionately known as "Indie."



South



Front



East



North

Ray Sorensen says he's "been in love with art" ever since he was young. The painter of The Freedom Rock explains the front of his 2011 mural featured a likeness of Greenfield's own Lance Corporal C.J. Miller, who was killed in action in 2006 by a roadside bomb in Iraq, and his great Uncle Albert Sorensen, who fought in the Battle of the Bulge. The rock's east side featured a special tribute to the Navy SEALs for their uncovering of Osama Bin Laden.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SORENSEN STUDIOS

moved after seeing the movie *Saving Private Ryan* — so much he went out and used his talents to paint an inspirational message of thanks to veterans on the town's graffiti rock.

Referring to this movie, he explains, "Those kids storming the beach at Normandy were 17-18 years old and literally spilling their guts for our country. So I thought, 'I just want to remind people to know what Memorial Day is all about.' And that was before September 11th — before the re-patriotizing of our country."

That was in 1999, and since then, he's painted inspiring and patriotic images on the nearly 12-foot-high boulder each May. After that first year, he never intended to paint the rock again, but veterans liked it so much they asked for a repeat performance. Hence, he's become known as "The Freedom Rock Painter."

A true memorial

For the last 13 years, Ray has used the rock canvas to thank each branch of the U.S. military, while memorializing battles and wars from our country's past. He derives his inspiration from stories of men and women who have served our country, all true and often very close to home for Ray and the Greenfield community of some 2,000 residents, where he and his wife, Maria, reside with their infant daughter, "Indie."

The Sorensens share that The Freedom Rock has taken on a life of its own. It's regularly frequented by visitors desiring to see the landmark dedicated to veterans and wanting to hear about the stories painted on the rock and about the painter himself.

It's also become a place of reflection for veterans and for families who've lost loved ones to war. In an interview for "The 700 Club," Ray shared, "There are veterans who have

come here who haven't even talked to their families — they've told me they haven't talked to their families — but feel like they can talk to me and share their stories, share their struggles and what they went through over there, that they've never wanted to talk about."

Ray relays that there have been many unique things that have occurred since he started painting The Freedom Rock. "But one thing that stands out in my mind is that I've painted the ashes of over 30 Vietnam veterans into the north side of the rock."

Images on the rock's north side pay tribute to Vietnam veterans. A large helicopter there includes the ashes which, when added to the paint, make differing shades of green (see photo). Ray first painted ashes onto the rock in 2006.

While he was re-painting The Freedom Rock that May, some Vietnam veterans stopped by on their way to the wall in D.C. Maria tells, "They had the remains of some fellow Vietnam brothers, and asked if Bubba could sprinkle the ashes at the rock's base." He suggested they pour the ashes into his paint — as they'd blow away in the wind.

"What an amazing experience that was to watch as Bubba took the ashes, poured them into his green paint and spread them onto The Freedom Rock with his paint brush," Maria recollects in her blog. "There were definitely some tears gathering in my eyes especially

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As the Freedom Rock Painter, Ray Sorensen has been featured numerous times on national television, including on "The 700 Club" featured on CBN-TV. This segment was shot in Ray and Maria's Sorensen Studios.



Last August, the Sorensen family sponsored a steer raised by Claire Solsma of Sanborn, Iowa, for the 29th annual Governor's Charity Steer Show and Auction at the Iowa State Fair that benefited Ronald McDonald Houses of Iowa. Ray Sorensen, The Freedom Rock Painter, was the celebrity showperson for Solsma's Hereford that was sponsored and purchased by a group that called themselves "These Progressive Hereford Breeders of Iowa."

Recent Facebook posts

👍 "I have followed this experience for over 10 years now. As a Vet, I am honored that you so beautifully express what many of us feel. Thanks for sharing your work and our experience to the world."

👍 "I just stumbled upon your website, and your artwork on the rock is absolutely amazing. You are a wonderful American and I'm so grateful to you for appreciating the amazing service of men and women who are fighting for us! Keep rockin'!"

👍 "Thank you, Ray Sorensen II. I have traveled to The Rock at least five times and your art amazes me. Each time I arrive, someone else stops by and I get to meet another service member. I tell everyone about this work of art and act of your patriotism. Again, THANK YOU!"

👍 "Tucked away in rural Iowa is this awesome tribute to our brave members of the United States military...I thank all who are serving or have served to keep our country free."

👍 "I am almost speechless; I am so impressed with this deep feeling work." **HW**

as I glanced at the family who was completely silent.”

Ray adds, “Every year I get somebody’s ashes in the mail, or a lot of times people will come out on Memorial Day Weekend [to the Rock] and want me to add them then.”

“Rock Season”

Now in his 14th year of painting The Freedom Rock, Ray has the logistics of painting this “big undertaking” nearly down pat. “I know what it involves now so it’s not quite the fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants as when I was younger.”

His thought process for the images is a year in the making. But these images are subject to change, dictated by weather, amount of detail and time. The month that leads up to the unveiling of the

“new” version of The Freedom Rock is what’s known as “Rock Season” for the entire Sorensen family.

It kicks off the last week in April, when Ray paints over the rock on a nice day in order to have a solid white canvas from which to start. Repainting each year keeps the The Rock fresh, new and people coming back, he says.

Throughout May, Ray is often found working late and eating meals on-site, delivered by his wife and mother-in-law. “I’m always done by Memorial Day no matter what,” he says, often painting right up until the day before.

On Memorial Day Weekend, you’ll find him and Maria and their extended family, including parents and grandparents, celebrating their holiday at The

Freedom Rock, all greeting visitors and answering questions.

On that day, and throughout May, “everybody does their little part to help me out because The Rock has just become a lot bigger than I ever expected,” Ray explains. “It’s kind of taken on a life of its own and now has a supporting cast. I’m just the artist. And I like that — I’d much rather it be about the veterans. It’s this large, strong boulder that stands out there against all the elements and holds up the message.”

The family and future of Freedom Rock

The uniqueness of The Freedom Rock and the story of this painter have attracted the attention of national television and print media worldwide. Ray still receives letters, most now digitally instead of handwritten as was the case early on. He and Maria also receive phone calls and Facebook posts (see sidebar, “Recent Facebook posts”), and interview requests help keep The Freedom Rock’s spirit “alive,” he says.

Maria, who is a photographer by profession and also a blogger, is the public relations agent for The Freedom Rock, managing phone calls, messages and inquiries. Married to Ray in 2007, she says, “I get to meet so many amazing people from all over the world because of this, so it’s truly a unique experience. All of the people we have met have really become like family to us.”

Last fall, Ray and Maria welcomed their daughter, Indie, short for her patriotic name Independence, into The Freedom Rock family. This couple is especially excited about this year’s Rock Season and Memorial Day — it’s Indie’s first experience with her daddy painting The Freedom Rock, his thank you to our nation’s veterans, described by one admirer as “truly an American treasure.”

For more information, follow The Freedom Rock on Facebook or visit thefreedomrock.com. **HW**

Veteran and military outreach

Combining their love for art and photography, Ray and Maria Sorensen opened their Sorensen Studios and The Freedom Rock® in 2008.

Ray has more than 10 years experience in mural paintings and graphic design and remains engaged in ad design and layout for his family’s *Livestock Plus* publication.

This couple is also engaged in their community and with outreach projects spurred by The Freedom Rock. Military visitors and tour buses frequent the mural and Sorensen Studios, and Ray is often asked to speak, especially on military holidays.

Even though it wasn’t his intent, The Freedom Rock has helped get Ray’s name out as an artist too, often while he is assisting veteran and military causes. His artwork has been featured on The Iowa \$2 The Freedom Rock Scratch Ticket, which benefited the Iowa Veterans Trust Fund, and was on the cover of the state’s Department of Veteran Affairs booklet.

Ray painted a rock for the Iowa Junior Angus Association’s giveaway which benefited the military at last summer’s national junior show, and his artwork was recommended by military men and women for use on Delta Airlines luggage carts for deploying troops.

He shares that when Delta provided him with cart specifications, he noticed there was one that was different. He later realized it as the cart used to take deceased military men and women from the plane.

Ray remarks, “It was really neat to be a part of that because they were coming home to their final resting place on some of my artwork,” — a fitting tribute to The Freedom Rock painter. **HW**



Military visitors and tour buses frequent The Freedom Rock. Last summer, Adair County veterans made The Rock one of their destinations on their heritage tractor ride.